

THE SPUR OF FATE

By Ashley Towne

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"This is a wonderfully efficient force," he said. "Such of your men as I have seen appear to be armed and disciplined as well as the crack regiments of France or Germany. Circassia gained a fighting reputation sixty or seventy years ago, and the world has not forgotten it. Indeed one need not go back so far. And yet I am bound to say that if an angel had come down to tell me that such troops as these could come out of your country I would have asked for evidence. How could Russia have been blind to your designs?"

"The credit belongs to Kilzlar," answered Vera. "He has been secretly at work for a long time, and it was he who threw dust in the eyes of the czar."

"Unless I am misinformed," said Darrell, "he was Russia's ranking general in your country and for all practical purposes its governor. Therefore he is now doubly a traitor in the eyes of the czar."

"He stakes his life upon the success of our cause," replied Vera.

"And what has been your part in this warlike venture?" asked Darrell.

"You were so good as to speak in praise of the arms of our troops," she answered. "Nearly all our modern weapons, including a large part of the cannon and the ammunition of all kinds, were purchased by me in France, and it was I who planned their secret shipment. That was my mission in Paris."

"And it accounts for the visit of M. Clery."

"He was of great use to me," said Vera. "I think he took an especial interest in the matter because of the novelty of dealing with a woman. He flattered me by saying that I was absolutely a freak of nature in my capacity for understanding the material of war."

"I think he did you no more than justice," said Darrell. "It was a tremendous task to buy this armament, and, by the way, it must have cost a lot of money. I can hardly understand how your revolutionary treasury could have furnished the amount."

"When I came down to Stavropol," said Vera, "to obtain the funds hidden by my father, I chanced upon the secret of a treasure laid up long ago for the needs of Circassian patriots. That such a fund had once existed was known, but no one knew what had become of it in the disasters following our last struggle, more than thirty years ago. The story is long. Suffice it to say that I chanced upon the secret, and the treasure was recovered. It was at that time that I first met Prince Kilzlar, who had sought the treasure vainly. He set my heart on fire with prophesies of my country's freedom. He told me that my descent from the most noble family of Circassia would win the hearts of the people and make me a queen. Yet you must not think that I was moved by personal ambition."

"I am far from that error," answered Darrell. "Of the two treasures thus discovered you at least were pure gold. As to the other, did it pass into Kilzlar's custody?"

Vera shook her head.

"I did not then trust him to that extent," she said. "A revolutionary committee was formed, and to that body I revealed the secret. The money has been disbursed under the warrant of that committee."

"I commend your prudence," said Darrell.

Vera looked at him steadily and with a scarcely perceptible smile.

"Prince Kilzlar is a hasty man," she said. "When he had you in his power, his natural impulse—natural as a tiger's—was to put you out of the way. Your methods differ from his. You are the coldest blooded man I ever met, and he is one of the most fiery. But which is the more unjust?"

Darrell's face flushed painfully, yet he still wore an air of calm, still spoke as if the conversation dealt with an abstract problem outside the field of personal interest.

"You are mistaken if you suppose that I am trying to do Prince Kilzlar an injury," he rejoined. "That he tried to take my life is as small a matter to me as it is to you."

"A small matter to me!" echoed Vera, her hand closing on the hilt of the sword. "If he had succeeded and you had looked down from the stars afterward, I think the wrath of your spirit would have been satisfied. But now that he has failed and you are safe he remains merely Kilzlar, Circassia's

best soldier and at heart a good patriot."

"A bad man cannot be a good patriot," answered Darrell. "He cannot be a good anything, except perhaps a good soldier, as this man is. The trade requires no conscience. I saw Kilzlar commit a murder for greed and attempt another for mere anger, and that stamps him indelibly to my eye. But for his own personal merits he is nothing to me. It is only because his character affects your personal safety and the success of the cause to which you have devoted yourself that I speak of him."

"My personal safety is not worth speaking of," replied Vera, "except as it may affect the cause. Yet you are insane to suppose that Kilzlar's abhorred love for me is in any way a menace."

"I had not that in mind," answered Darrell earnestly. "It is the conduct of this war that makes me shudder for you, that forces me to warn you, though I have neither right nor authority to do so."

"And what have you to say of the conduct of the war?" she asked. "Have we not met with success?"

"Vera," he said, "what is the object of this struggle?"

"To free my country."

"Is it free? Have you driven the Russians out of it?"

"We shall," she cried, "and in the meantime—"

"In the meantime," said Darrell, "you are engaged in an utterly hopeless war of invasion. What was your hope in this campaign? To take Stavropol? I will grant that you might conceivably succeed. Even so, you could not have dreamed of going further, and you certainly could not have expected to hold the place indefinitely without anything that could be called a line of communications, without possibility of re-enforcement, with only the resources of the city itself to depend upon. A successful retreat would have been your best expectation."

"Why not terms?" demanded Vera, rising. "Do you think our successes would have won us no consideration?"

"Not on Russian soil," answered Darrell. "Every success you win outside your own borders is an obstacle in the way of your liberty. You cannot conquer Russia. Your only chance was to persuade her that the reconquest of Circassia at this time would cost too much in men and treasure. What does the government in St. Petersburg care about the loss of Gredskov as a military incident? Nothing. But as an act demanding reprisals the taking of that city assumes importance. It is the same with Vladikaukas, and the taking of Stavropol would make your cause hopeless."

"Prince Kilzlar does not think so," said Vera, pale with excitement.

"Prince Kilzlar has never had any other opinion," rejoined Darrell. "He is a soldier, a man of long experience in war, familiarly acquainted with Russian governmental policy. Vera, when such a man moved your army beyond the boundary of the country you were fighting to free he proved that he was not a patriot. The soldier of freedom resents aggression. He takes up arms for the purpose of expelling tyrants; he defends his own land; he stands upon his rights and strives to win the respect of the world. But to rush out of his own country, leaving its strongest fortified places still in the hands of the intruder, to invade the territory of a monstrous power like Russia, with no hope except to inflict a certain amount of injury and then withdraw—this could not be the act of a trained soldier who was also a patriot. To Kilzlar the military principles and the policies involved were plain as one plus one makes two. He did not organize this campaign in the interests of Circassia."

"In whose, then?" she cried.

"In his own, Vera," replied Darrell, "for loot. There was a rich treasure in Gredskov, imperfectly guarded through Russian oversight. Kilzlar knew of it, and now he has it absolutely in his hands."

"Why not?" demanded Vera. "Will not money help our cause?"

"My child," he rejoined, without meaning to use the term which made the princess red with wrath, "is it conceivable that Russia will permit you to hold this sum? It is a mere item in the bill that you must settle. Your whole policy should have been to secure the easiest terms, and this is the way to get the hardest. Your only problem was this: How much can I make it cost Russia to retake Circassia in proportion to the injury which she has suffered in the loss of it? The lighter the injury the better for you."

"I have heard that the Americans considered money above all things," Vera began, but Darrell interrupted her with a groan.

"Let me hasten to make an end of this," he cried. "I have not forfeited your regard and suffered the misery that torments a gloomy prophet without a definite object. You will send an order to Prince Kilzlar. It is not too late to change your plan. I would have your force and his move westward, effecting a junction at the earliest possible moment. The Russian force south of you is unprepared for such a movement and is, besides, hampered by its own anxieties, due to failure of the co-operating force to come down from the north. You will have no difficulty. You can withdraw into Circassia without loss, and then you can use this really admirable army for defense of your country."

"It is the policy of cowardice!" exclaimed Vera. "Why, you yourself admit that these Russians south of us are caught in a trap. By your own report they are scarcely equal in number to my command in this city. Shall I run away while they are quaking in their boots, or shall I crush them between two millstones?"

"If your sole thought is for Circassia," said Darrell, "you will avoid a victory that cannot seriously weaken but only embitter your enemy."

"Really," said the princess, "I am both ashamed and grieved. I hoped for help and bold counsel from you, and instead you—"

"I have given you the best counsel I had," answered Darrell sadly. "Now give me a gun and post me in the front rank, and if the march is on to Stavropol I will cheer the order."

But Vera did not seem to hear him. She rapped upon the table with her sword, and the orderly appeared.

"See who is there," said the princess.

Several officers entered hastily, as if upon important errands. There was with them a man, in the dress of a Russian peasant, who seemed, however, to be a soldier of Circassia. He was much the worse for hard travel and tottered with weariness. Vera gave him a quick glance and acknowledged his salute. Then she turned to Darrell, saying coldly:

"We will speak later of your return to Paris."

Darrell bowed most respectfully and retired from the room.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE PIPE.

IN the room to which the two men had been assigned on their arrival in the city Colonel Korna found Darrell some minutes after that unfortunate individual had been dismissed by the princess.

"I suppose that was English who was speaking as I entered," said the colonel. "I do not understand it."

"That is well for your soul," returned Darrell. "The language was violent."

"What was the matter?" asked Korna, and then without waiting for an answer, "What are you going to do with that thing?"

This question referred to the faded cloak which Darrell had taken from the idiot, Musef.

"I have made a fool of myself, Colonel Korna," said the American. "Please do not ask me how, but take my word that it was done in a way that the most brainless monkey ever born in a tree could not have bettered. Having done it, I was naturally reminded of this idiot's belongings. Do you suppose there is any beeswax in Vladikaukas?"

"Is that question a part of your disguise?" laughed Korna, for Darrell had put on the cloak and taken up the pipes upon which Musef had played.

Darrell convinced Korna that he was serious, whereupon the latter replied that it would be singular if a town of the size of Vladikaukas contained no beeswax, but he did not know just where it could be found.

"We have had great news," he added. "A spy has come down all the way from Stavropol. The report of the railway wreck which has delayed the Russian force is confirmed. Moreover—"

"I am out of favor with the khan," said Darrell, interrupting. "I do not feel that I should listen to your military secrets."

Korna stared, and then, seeing that Darrell was serious, he was about to express his sympathy when he was hastily summoned to the khan's presence.

Darrell put away the cloak and pipe and went out into the town, where he found many small stores open, for there was excellent order in the place, and secured without great difficulty a supply of beeswax and black goat's hair, with which he built up a beard almost as wild as Musef's. A beard constructed in this way by a man experienced in the art will bear close inspection. Having completed his task, he wrote a note to Korna in these words:

My Dear Colonel—I am going to try to get through the Russian lines with a copy of the khan's cipher message to Prince Kilzlar. If I am not heard of within ten days, will you please inform the khan of my attempt? I would have you maintain silence for that interval, if you can do so without serious inconvenience, and if I do not return, I would have you remember me pleasantly, as I shall remember you so long as I retain the faculty.

He left this where Korna would find it and then, mounted upon a grotesque little mule that he had purchased, made his way out through the Circassian lines, the soul of the khan upon the order that he bore being his warrant.

The mule was a sturdy brute, and, though Darrell made a wide detour, so that he seemed to be coming up from the east, it was not later than 3 o'clock in the afternoon when he was halted by Russian pickets upon the right wing of their force.

An utter recklessness had taken possession of Darrell since his wretched interview with Vera. He had ridden along the road rehearsing the demeanor of Musef as he had observed it, practicing the peculiarities of speech that had distinguished the idiot and fitting crack brained jests from his own memory to the language in which they must be uttered.

He had given some attention also to the pipes, but found it easier because of his especial aptitude to imitate the sound of the instrument than to play upon it.

When the picket cried out "Halt!" Darrell euffed the mule's ear and cried "Halt!" to him in an excellent copy of the Russian soldier's tone, whereat another soldier laughed. Meanwhile the mule kept straight on and did not stop until the soldiers had him by the bridle, one on each side.

"It is Musef the Traveler," said the soldier who had laughed. "I have seen him in Stavropol."

If Darrell had been in a humor favorable to fear, this utterance would have alarmed him seriously. He had not attempted a personation. It was impossible that he should be mistaken

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for Musef by any one who had more than the feeblest recollection of the original. It had not occurred to Darrell's mind that the imbecile could have so wide a fame. His sole idea had been to take the guise of a harmless character. If detected as a counterfeit, he might expect a spy's fate.

"I don't remember you," he said, "but still you may have seen me. I played under the windows of the jail."

It was the other soldier's turn to laugh, and he welcomed the chance. His comrade took the jest without offense.

"It was through a window that I saw you," he said, "but the window of a grogshop, not a jail."

"It seems I was a little early for you with my serenade," rejoined Darrell. "I'll give it to you now if you'd like to hear it."

He put the pipe to his lips and played a few notes.

"Here, quit that!" cried one of the soldiers. "We're close to the lines, and the noise may be heard."

"You have no ear for music," said Darrell. "Get along!" the last words being addressed to the mule.

The soldiers had let go of the bridle and had stepped aside. The animal started with alacrity, for Darrell had learned how to appeal to him with a touch of the heel.

"Halt! Come back here!" cried the Russians in duet, and one of them threw a stick that lay handy beside him. It missed Darrell and by good luck hit the mule. Secretly encouraged by his rider, the brute ran away, but at no very great speed.

"Don't shoot. I'll catch him!" exclaimed one of the Russians, and Darrell, looking back, saw him coming, while the other, rifle in hand, was now unable to fire, even if he had wished to do so, because of the risk of hitting his comrade.

Darrell urged the mule to better speed. The running soldier halted, calling out a threat, but at that moment Darrell reached the crest of a little rise in the road and saw ahead of him, at no great distance, an advanced portion of the Russian line. Ten seconds more and he knew, the picket would not dare to shoot.

"I'm stopping him!" he called, making a great feint of struggling with the bridle rein, and the soldier, seeing that the mule's pace was slackening, lowered his gun.

"It's all right!" Darrell shouted over his shoulder. "I've got him now. I'm safe."

And having brought the mule to a more moderate pace, he sat up straight in the saddle and, putting the pipe to his lips, rode on, discoursing weird, uncanny music. Soldiers were advancing toward him; behind him the picket, swearing and laughing at the same time, waved a signal to the squad beyond and tapped his forehead to denote the mental condition of this extraordinary rider.

Darrell was soon surrounded, but by cleverly playing his role he escaped being sent back. The squad took him into the lines, and he was bandying rough jests with them when an officer advanced, commanding silence.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Excellency," responded Darrell, "I have come to dinner."

He slid off the mule's back and leaned against the animal as if too weak to stand. Then in response to questions he told in a crack brained fashion the story of wandering that he had carefully prepared, founded upon the possibilities of Musef's character. He had traveled with a caravan; he had left it and had lost his way. All the houses by the road were empty. He had found no one to give him food.

"I believe the fellow is really starving," said the officer. "Let him have something to eat. Search him, however."

Darrell was searched, but nothing suspicious was found, for he had prepared himself for such an ordeal. His garments throughout and the emptiness of their ragged pockets befitted the character which he had assumed. Vera's order, tightly rolled, was inside Musef's pipe, but it did not occur to these men's minds that a wind instrument which could be played upon might contain any article contraband.

The band ceased with a rattle of brass, and the next instant Darrell was inside the line of soldiers, holding to his lips the pipes of Musef, from which there seemed to issue a shrill and lively tune. The thing was so quickly done that no one raised a hand to stop him as he began to march with a crazy dignity in the direction of the musicians. The crowd laughed, the soldiers waited for an order, and the officers, seeing no harm done, hesitated to give it.

"You do not play so badly," said Darrell, lowering his pipe and addressing the leader of the band, "but my music is much more popular."

ed from his own lips, quite independent of the apparent source of it.

"Feed him and keep an eye on him," was the officer's order, and Darrell obtained food of which he was really much in need. Afterward he was allowed to sleep on a pile of blankets in the rear of the line, where some officers' horses were tethered. A fringe of trees approached near to this spot, a spur of the woods. In the latter part of the afternoon there was a smart and sudden shower. Some of the soldiers sought shelter under the trees, and it was remembered that the demented wanderer went with them, but not a man of that force saw him afterward, except a picket on the road toward Gredskov, who in the early evening challenged a shadow flitting by in the edge of some bushes, fired upon it and then decided that it must have been a wild animal if, indeed, it was not a product of his own imagination.

At daybreak a Circassian outpost in sight of the walls of Gredskov halted a grotesque and travel worn creature, apparently demented, yet with wit enough to know his own business, and after brief questioning sent him into the city under guard of a single man to find Captain Varnek, for whom he asserted that he had an important message.

If Darrell had declared that his business was with Prince Kilzlar, it might have been looked upon as the customary delusion of a "crank," and had he shown the Princess Vera's order at such an early stage of the proceedings other hands than his would probably have delivered it. Therefore he had named Varnek, the officer who had been charged with his execution, whom Korna had described as a friend—certainly a man devoted to the khan and well suited to be Darrell's intermediary in this matter.

It appeared, however, when they were within the city that Captain Varnek was not an easy man to find. Darrell's guide was directed here and there with the greatest positiveness in each case, but always wrongly, and Darrell was on the point of attempting direct communication with Kilzlar when the problem was solved in an unexpected manner.

In the open space beside the prison a great crowd was gathered, and as Darrell and his guard passed in the course of their search they heard the sound of music and saw in the midst of the throng a considerable body of troops drawn up in hollow square. Two tall timbers with a crossbar on top seemed to define most dimly the occasion of this gathering.

"An execution?" asked Darrell. "For what crime?"

"I heard the fellow had assisted the escape of a prisoner condemned by order of the prince," was the reply. "He used to be a turnkey in that prison."

"Did you hear his name?"

"Kevski, or something like that," answered the man indifferently.

"They will hang him?" exclaimed Darrell in horror at the fate of this man to whom he owed his own life.

"By the feet," replied the soldier. "I believe there's some idea of getting a confession out of him, and when you hang a man by the neck he hasn't so much time to think the matter over. I could never understand why people should want to see such a thing." And he pointed to the crowd with a gesture of contempt that did him much credit.

Darrell was already breaking through the crowd, and in half a minute he had come up to the thin line of soldiers by which it was restrained. At that moment the unfortunate Kevski was hoisted up, his feet bound together, the rope by which he was supported being made fast between them. He swung at first but little clear of the ground, his hands bound behind his back, his body slowly twisting on the rope.

This barbarity is not uncommon in that region, and it has a terrifying element of uncertainty, for the amount of torture inflicted by it can never be known in advance, since it depends upon the endurance of the individual. Men have lived incredibly long and have endured indescribable torments, while others have passed beyond pain in a few minutes.

It is always a new wonder to the most experienced that such a spectacle can be given the aspect of an entertainment, yet here was the band braying as if to gather spectators for a mountebank's performance, and here were the people striving for the best places. Jest was far easier to hear than expressions of sympathy, though these citizens of Gredskov, bred under an alien rule, had no knowledge of public punishments for justice's sake, but only as the cruelties of an irresponsible tyrant.

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